

# D.C.-area artists who recorded in a van during covid finally play live



By [Daniel Wu](#)

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As the pandemic set in, shutting the clubs and concert halls of the District that spawned go-go, jazz and punk scenes of national renown, musicians Aram Sinnreich and Dunia Best couldn't sit still.

So Sinnreich, a professor at American University, put out a call for demo submissions in the summer of 2021, and the pair began roaming the D.C. region in a repurposed university van packed with recording equipment — determined to reconnect with a community of artists that had fallen silent. In driveways and parking lots, they recorded a diverse array of local artists from genres on the fringes of D.C.'s music scene.

"Instead of them having to get out of their shells and go to a professional recording studio and lay down a bunch of money if they've been out of work," Sinnreich said, "we would bring the studio to them."

The year-long project, dubbed "Out of Our Shells," culminated in a concert Sunday and the release of a compilation album the day after. On a breezy afternoon, the strangest of lineups filled a Takoma backyard with bagpipe blasts, harmonica solos and the patter of Colombian drums.

It wasn't a sold out show in a hallowed jazz hall, but to Sinnreich, it was authentic D.C. music, through and through.

"There is a wealth of musical talent and culture in the D.C. region that does not normally percolate to our media and our official narrative," Sinnreich said. "We've only begun to tap that."

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Punk and ska guitarist Richard Benjumea remembers the "fateful night" in March 2020 when news of a virus came on the TV as he drank with bandmates at a bar. They figured it was no big deal. Then the lockdown came, and without gigs or rehearsals to play, his band drifted apart. His drummer moved to Florida. A guitarist left for L.A.

"I was kind of back at square one," Benjumea said.

Paapa-Berchie Berko was ready for his big break. The Maryland-born R&B singer, then still finishing his final semester at the University of North Carolina, was slated to open for a concert at school and meet executives from Interscope Records. Instead, he sat in his childhood bedroom and read the email announcing that campus wouldn't reopen after spring break.

"I found out on the day we shut down that I was chosen to be the opener," Berko said. "It hurt."

Around them, mainstays in D.C.'s music scene withered. Beloved jazz club Twins shuttered in August 2020, and legendary nightclub U Street Music Hall followed in October. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser's initial attempt to reintroduce in-person shows at a few venues with strict capacity limits was met with concerns from organizers.

Benjumea, Berko and the rest of the D.C. region's musicians — cut off from a music scene known for its intimacy — suddenly had to forge on with their art alone, confined to their homes.

Alison Caro and her bandmates in the all-female Colombian band La Marvela tried playing together online, but it didn't feel right. Without quality microphones, their sound suffered. And the slight delays on video calls made it impossible to play complex drumbeats in time. Violist Megan DiGeorgio couldn't bear her own haphazard collaborations over Zoom, where instrumentalists performed individually listening to only click tracks.

"I just got so burned out on it," DiGeorgio said. "It was lacking what really makes me love music, the real, actual collaboration."

All of them, though, wanted to continue playing. When news of Sinnreich's traveling recording studio came in through the grapevine, they leaped at the chance to make something new.

"I had to guard the parking lots in front of my house," said Amy Vitro, a bandmate of Caro's who, by 2021, was hosting La Marvela for socially distanced rehearsals at her Silver Spring home. When Sinnreich arrived with his van and rigged Vitro's living room with microphones and cables, La Marvela finally had the gear to professionally record an original song for the first time.

At a vacant, underground punk club, an empty church and several sessions inside the van, Sinnreich and Best recorded 14 artists altogether. They picked from around 100 demo submissions to also feature bagpipers from the Maryland Youth Pipe Band, a saxophone-led cover band dedicated to '70s funk group War and Rocknoceros, a folksy duet that covered children's songs.

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On Sunday, almost all of the artists from the project came together for a small concert at Rhizome DC, a community art house in Takoma, to celebrate the upcoming release of the album.

Around 50 fans filtered in to Rhizome's leafy backyard to watch. Most of them, as Sinnreich had hoped, ended up hearing something completely new.

“You’ve got hip-hop fans from Southeast [D.C.] and you’ve got Afropop fans from Silver Spring and you’ve got folk musicians from Mount Pleasant,” Sinnreich said before the show of the varied scenes across the region he was hoping to bring together.

The artists were — finally — next to each other in person too, Berko snapping along to La Marvela’s performance while DiGeorgio chatted with the bagpipers. For some, it was a quiet pit stop amid a schedule of shows that have come roaring back after coronavirus restrictions relaxed and venues reopened. For others like Benjumea, it was a milestone — the first live performance of his band’s new lineup after he hastily reassembled a crew during the pandemic.

La Marvela is more busy than ever, Caro said, with National Hispanic Heritage Month coming up in September. But playing on the “Out of Our Shells” album meant a lot to her; it was an opportunity to connect La Marvela to a broader audience when she feels Colombian bands — and an all-female one, no less — aren’t the most well-known among the District’s music scene.

“Because of the music that we have and the profile as a band that we have, I’ve felt a little bit like a tourist,” Caro said.

She was in her element when La Marvela took the stage, beaming as she took the microphone while Vitro started drumming. Their music, the shake of maracas punctuated by sharp drumbeats on the *llamador* and call-and-response chants, is made for dancing, she told the crowd.

“*Mi gente*, this is Colombia for you,” Caro said.

*Hope Davison contributed to this report.*